DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 225 038 CG 016 386

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TITLE Personal Involvement and the Generalizability of Salience Effects.
PUB DATE May 82
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwestern Psychological Association (54th, Minneapolis, MN, May 6-8, 1982).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Attribution Theory; *Bias; Communication (Thought Transfer); Evaluative Thinking; Interpersonal Relationship; Motivation; Perception; Social Attitudes; *Social Cognition
IDENTIFIERS *Personal Involvement; *Salience Effects

ABSTRACT

Previous research in social cognition has established that 'top of the head" processing is a robust inferential bias, even in engrossing task situations. Three experiments were conducted to examine the generalizability of perceptual salience effects. In each experiment, salience was manipulated by varying the visual prominence of discussants in a two-person conversation. In two experiments involvement was manipulated, and in a third experiment, involvement was operationalized as a subject variable. Analyses of results showed that, as expected, ratings of highly involved perceivers reflected more systematic procesing of message arguments, regardless of which discussant was visually salient, whereas ratings of less involved perceivers reflected "top of the head" processing. The findings suggest that the study of personal involvement is a fruitful direction for social cognition researchers. (Author/JAC)

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ED225038

Personal Involvement and the Generalizability of Salience Effects

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Paper presented at the meeting of the Midwestern Psychological Association, May 6-8, 1982, Minneapolis, Minnesota

CG 016386

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One approach to the study of inferential biases that has emerged over the past few years involves an examination of the boundary conditions that specify the generalizability of these inferential tendencies. The present research concerns the generalizability of one such inferential bias -- perceptual salience effects -- under conditions of personal involvement.

Recent research in social cognition suggests that judgments made by social perceivers are often influenced by seemingly trivial, but salient situational cues. Salience tends to draw the attentional focus of perceivers. This attentional focus, in turn, has important consequences for various types of social judgments made by perceivers. Evaluative judgments, for example, tend to be more extreme for salient than for nonsalient stimuli. Likewise, research indicates that whether causality is attributed to a situation, object or actor may depend on which entity is more salient to the perceiver. Taylor and Fiske (1978) have labelled these attentional effects "top of the head" processing.

Taylor, Fiske, as well as McArthur (1981) and others, have examined the pervasiveness of these attentional effects. For example, Taylor, Fiske and their colleagues (1979) conducted three experiments to assess the extent to which salience effects occur in more involving situations. In all their experimental conditions, salience effects emerged despite attempts to reduce their impact.

To date, few delimiting conditions for the pervasiveness of perceptual salience have been demonstrated. While it is evident that salient stimuli have a strong impact on attributions in many situations, it is not clear that any study has yet demonstrated salience effects in a situation which is highly involving for the perceiver. Taylor, Fiske, and their colleagues operationalized involvement as the level of importance subjects assigned to an issue and found that salience effects generalized to these high involvement subjects. We suspect

that the reason involved subjects fell prey to the visual salience cues can be explained by the nature of their rather limited level of involvement. Involvement operationalized as importance may not be sufficient to motivate subjects to attend to cues other than the salient cues. Personal involvement is activated when a person perceives that an issue, person or situation has hedonic relevance for the person's life. A nineteen year old Minnesotan who drinks, for example, is likely to feel personally involved with legislation that proposes to raise the state drinking age to twenty-one.

The importance of personal involvement as a moderator variable has emerged in other areas of research in social cognition. Personal involvement, for example, appears to moderate attitude-behavior consistency. Borgida and Campbell (1982), for example, have demonstrated that the hedonic consequences of an attitudinally-related behavior moderated attitude-behavior relations. Not only does personal involvement appear to moderate attitude-behavior consistency, it also has important consequences for attitude change and the processing of attitudinally-relevant information. Petty, Cacioppo, and their colleagues (1981) have shown that personal involvement activates attentional direction and influences the thoughtfulness or mindfulness with which issue-relevant arguments are considered. Personal involvement appears to motivate the individual to expend the effort necessary for more thoughtful evaluation of message contents.

Given the importance of personal involvement as a moderator variable in these domains, we predicted personal involvement might also moderate the effects of visual salience on social judgments and attributions. High personal involvement may moderate the effects of visual salience by directing a perceiver's attention to aspects of the situation that are more important and relevant to forming impressions and making attributions. Personal involvement may also increase the amount and quality of thought devoted to evaluating the stimulus situation.

If the attentional effects assocated with salient stimuli can be modified by personal involvement, then it might be expected that the enhanced awareness of cues other than the visually salient cues might attenuate salience effects. In other words, high involvement may shift attention from peripheral, salient stimuli to the message content of the situation. The extent to which high personal involvement moderates, and therefore limits, the generalizability of salience attentional effects was examined in three experiments.

Procedure: In each experiment that we conducted, salience was manipulated by varying the visual prominence of discussants in a two-person conversation. The conversation format involved each discussant giving opposing views on an issue. Each discussion was filmed on videotape and three different visual perspectives were created, one in which the For discussant was visually salient, one in which the Against discussant was visually salient, and one in which both discussants were equally visible. This perceptual salience manipulation was the same as that used by Taylor, Fiske, and their colleagues. Care was taken to ensure that each discussant presented an equivalent number of equally strong arguments.

In Experiments 1 & 2, personal involvement was manipulated by varying whether subjects believed they would be personally affected by a proposed change in psychology course requirements. This proposed change was the issue discussed in the videotape. In Experiment 1, subjects were either told that the proposed change in psychology course requirements would be implemented in the next quarter (High Involvement) or in three years' time (Low Involvement). This is an involvement manipulation used in other research by Petty, Cacioppo and their colleagues. As in Experiment 1, subjects in Experiment 2 were told that the proposed change would be implemented next quarter (High Involvement) or in 5-10 years' time (Low Involvement). In Experiment 3, the issue discussed was a state-wide change in the legal drinking age and personal involvement became

a subject variable. For each experiment, a manipulation check for involvement indicated significant differences between high and low involvement subjects.

Each subject viewed a 10-12 minute videotape and each discussant was rated on the following measures which have been typically used in research on salience effects. The Influence Index was composed of subjects' ratings of how persuasive, convincing, thorough, and competent each discussant was. The Causality Index was composed of subjects' ratings of how much each discussant set the tone of the conversation, determined the information that was exchanged, and caused the behavior of his or her partner. In Experiment 2, an additional measure of how much the discussant caused the partner to be persuasive, convincing, thorough and competent was included in the Causality Index. Subjects were also asked to recall as many for and against issue arguments as they could. For each dependent measure the For discussant rating minus the Against discussant rating was calculated. Thus, a positive score indicates that the For discussant was judged more influential or causal or had more arguments recalled. A negative score indicates that the Against discussant was judged more influential or causal or had more arguments recalled.

The research design in each experiment was a 3(Salience) x 2(Involvement) between-subjects design.

Results: In Experiment 1, salience effects were obtained on two of three dependent measures. Subjects tended to rate the For discussant more highly on the Influence Index when the For discussant was salient. When the Against discussant was salient she was rated more highly on the Influence Index. The same pattern of results was found on the recall measure.

In Experiment 2, we strengthened personal involvement by selecting only those subjects who would be more personally concerned if a change were made in psychology course requirements, i.e., those subjects who reported that they

planned on taking more psychology courses. We also selected subjects who were opposed to the proposed change. This procedure allowed us to predict a particular pattern of means for our High and Low involvement subjects taking into account their position on this issue. We expected that High involvement subjects would show a partisanship for the Against discussant, the discussant with whom they agreed. Thus we expected High involvement subjects to rate the Against discussant as more influential and causal in the situation. For Low involvement subjects, we expected that their relative lack of personal involvement in the issue would result in their rating the salient discussant as more influential and causal. Two orthogonal contrasts were performed to assess the extent to which the predicted pattern accounted for the data. The appropriately weighted contrast analysis tested the prediction that only the Low involvement subjects in the For discussant salient condition would rate the For discussant more influential and causal than the Against discussant.

The overall contrast revealed that only on the Causality Index did the data fit the predicted pattern, indicating that our Low involvement subjects' causality ratings were influenced by the salience of the discussants. High involvement subjects, on the other hand, were not influenced by the salience manipulation in the usual manner.

In Experiment 3, we again altered our involvement criteria and changed the issue that was discussed to a legislative proposal to change Minnesota's legal drinking age. Subjects selected for the High involvement condition disagreed with the proposed legislation, rated the issue as personally important and indicated on a behavioral checklist that their social activities were likely to be adversely affected by a change in the drinking age. Low involvement subjects also disagreed with the proposed legislation, but rated the issue as unimportant and reported that a change in the drinking age would have little effect

on their social activities.

An appropriately weighted contrast analysis was again applied to the influence and causality ratings. Salience effects were found not to generalize for High involvement subjects. On the Influence Index, Low involvement subjects clearly were affected by the visual salience of discussants. When the For discussant was salient, Low involvement subjects rated the For discussant as more persuasive, convincing, thorough, and competent in the discussion. When the Against discussant was salient, Low involvement subjects rated the Against discussant more highly on these measures. However, the High involvement subjects rated the Against discussant more highly on the Influence Index regardless of which discussant was salient. An analysis of variance was performed on the recall measures and only a marginally significant effect for Involvement was found such that High involvement subjects accurately recalled more Against arguments relative to For arguments than Low involvement subjects.

The question addressed by these three experiments was whether High personal involvement constitutes a boundary condition for salience effects. The answer seems to be yes. A state of High involvement seems to increase the motivation and/or ability to focus attention on other aspects of a situation and not just those stimuli that are perceptually salient, namely, the salient stimulus person. In our experiments, High personal involvement was sufficient to motivate subjects to give more thoughtful consideration to the message arguments made by discussants. High personal involvement, we would argue, increases the saliency of one's own stake in the issue and attenuates the saliency of other available, but peripheral cues.

Low personal involvement subjects, on the other hand, do engage in "top of the head" processing. These individuals seem to focus attention on more peripheral cues to guide their judgments and evaluations. Since the situation

has minimal hedonic relevance for them, they are less motivated to engage in more mindful evaluation of the message presentation.

Higgins, Kuiper, and Olson (1981) have recently noted the need for researchers in social cognition "to get personal". Our findings that personal involvement may limit the generalizability of salience effects leads us to believe that this is indeed a fruitful direction for social cognition researchers.

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Table 1

Mean Influence, Causality, and Accurate Recall as a Function of Salience and Personal Involvement - Experiment 1

		Salience		
	Personal Involvement	For Discussant Salient	Against Discussant Salient	Neither Salient
Influence[a] Index	Low	-.65 (n = 17)	-2.50 (n = 16)	-1.23 (n = 13)
	High	2.45 (n = 20)	-6.00 (n = 15)	-5.14 (n = 14)
Causality[b] Index	Low	-3.12	1.94	-1.54
	High	.80	-1.20	-.86
Recall[c]	Low	.59	.06	.23
	High	1.10	-.13	.07

[a]Positive scores on this composite measure indicate that the For discussant was seen as more persuasive, thorough, convincing, and competent relative to the Against discussant.

[b]Positive scores on this composite measure indicate that the For discussant was seen as setting the discussion tone, determining the kind of information exchanged, and causing the other discussant's behavior.

[c]Positive scores indicate more accurate recall of arguments made by the For discussant relative to arguments made by the Against discussant.

Table 2

Mean Influence, Causality, and Accurate Recall as a Function of Salience and Personal Involvement - Experiment 2

	Personal Involvement	Salience: For Discussant Salient	Salience: Against Discussant Salient	Salience: Neither Salient
Influence Index[a]	Low	-5.32 (n = 19)	-7.10 (n = 21)	-2.56 (n = 18)
	High	-7.18 (n = 17)	-2.16 (n = 19)	-3.58 (n = 19)
Causality Index[b]	Low	1.68	-3.19	1.06
	High	-1.88	.16	.79
Recall[c]	Low	-.42	-.10	.17
	High	.18	-.21	-.26

[a]Positive scores on this composite measure indicate that the For discussant was seen as more persuasive, thorough, convincing, and competent relative to the Against discussant.

[b]Positive scores on this composite measure indicate that the For discussant was seen as setting the discussion tone, determining the kind of information exchanged, causing the other discussant's behavior, and causing the other discussant to be persuasive, thorough, convincing, and competent.

[c]Positive scores indicate more accurate recall of arguments made by the For discussant relative to arguments made by the Against discussant.

Table 3

Mean Influence, Causality, and Accurate Recall as a Function of Salience and Personal Involvement - Experiment 3

	Personal Involvement	Salience: For Discussant Salient	Salience: Against Discussant Salient	Salience: Neither Salient
Influence Index[a]	Low	2.50 (n = 16)	-3.12 (n = 17)	.69 (n = 16)
	High	-3.41 (n = 17)	-1.85 (n = 20)	1.09 (n = 23)
Causality Index[b]	Low	-.18	1.35	2.44
	High	-.12	-.90	1.61
Recall[c]	Low	-1.00	-.71	-.06
	High	-1.18	-.95	-1.09

[a]Positive scores on this composite measure indicate that the For discussant was seen as more persuasive, thorough, convincing, and competent relative to the Against discussant.

[b]Positive scores on this composite measure indicate that the For discussant was seen as setting the discussion tone, determining the kind of information exchanged, and causing the other discussant's behavior.

[c]Positive scores indicate more accurate recall of arguments made by the For discussant relative to arguments made by the Against discussant.